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People speak up for public transit: Riders would like better reliability

By **ASHLEY FIELDING**
The Times
GAINESVILLE

Maryann Smith and her daughter, Cher Smith, have been riding the bus in Hall County nearly every day for three years. Neither of the women has a car, and both depend on Hall Area Transit for transportation to work, school and shopping centers.

The mother-daughter duo has a stake in the future of Hall Area Transit, and they -- along with nearly fifty other people -- attended the Gainesville-Hall Metropolitan Planning Organization's public hearing on Thursday to let local officials know the importance of the local transit system.

At the meeting, riders like the Smiths were able to tell transit officials how they could improve the area's current public transportation system.

Some people came to ask for extended riding hours and weekend bus operation. Others wanted the transit to connect with MARTA in Atlanta or to the Gwinnett County transit system.

Some attendees said the bus should stop at places that are important to those who use public transportation: the Oakwood DFACS, the Social Security office, the Frances Meadows Community Center and the East Hall Library.

There were those, like Cher Smith, who commented on the reliability of the current route system.

Smith said the bus routes have not been designed realistically. The route to Wal-Mart takes more time than what the schedule says it does, and it can affect the riders negatively, she said.

Cher and Maryann Smith sometimes find themselves stranded at the bus transfer station because the bus they are riding from Wal-Mart does not arrive at the transfer station in time. Since the bus they need has left by the time they arrive, they must wait 30 minutes, sometimes more and sometimes less, to catch the bus to their home.

Cher Smith said the unrealistic bus schedule puts stress on the riders and the drivers.

"They don't give (the bus drivers) enough time is what it is," she said.

Gainesville City Councilman George Wangemann said the public's perception of mass transit is that it is not reliable. He said he only sees one or two people

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riding the bus every day on his way to work.

"People don't want to pay tax dollars for only a few people to ride," Wangemann said.

Maryann Smith disagreed with Wangemann's observation. She said there are times in the afternoons when there is only room left to stand on the bus.

After the meeting, Cher Smith said perceptions like Wangemann's are common, because people in the city with cars do not take the time to think about those who need to use public transportation.

"A lot of people don't realize the need, because they don't know how many people use it," Cher Smith said. "A lot of people (in Gainesville) don't have transportation."

Other people at the meeting, like Gainesville State College students Shama Khimani and Tanjina Islam, expressed the need for expansion in the area's only public transportation system.

Khimani and Islam arrived at the meeting equipped with a petition of around 150 student signatures from those who want Hall Area Transit to cater to the Gainesville State campus.

They plan on getting more signatures for the cause.

Khimani, a member of the student government at Gainesville State, said the campus is overcrowded with cars, and currently there are three students for every one parking spot.

"Right now ... people are having to park in the grass (of the lower pond) and having to walk," Khimani said.

"It's really disrupting our daily routine."

The two students said they knew people who spend \$16 per day on a taxi to and from the college. They added that to their list of reasons why Hall Area Transit should have a route to Gainesville State in order to serve the community better.

Srikanth Yamala, senior transportation planner for the Gainesville-Hall Metropolitan Planning Organization, said the meeting was a success because of the public turnout and participation.

"We heard from folks who totally rely on transit, and at the same time we heard from folks who would use it if it was provided," Yamala said. "I couldn't ask for a greater input ... we definitely heard a lot of constructive comments."

Now that the community has expressed its needs for Hall Area Transit, it is up to Yamala and the Metropolitan Planning Organization to keep the wheels on the buses turning, he said.

"The hard task is back on us trying to synthesize all this information, process it and come up with findings so that we can include all the comments and present it back to folks," Yamala said, and added that the MPO plans to present their recommendations for the future of Hall Area Transit in the spring of 2008.

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